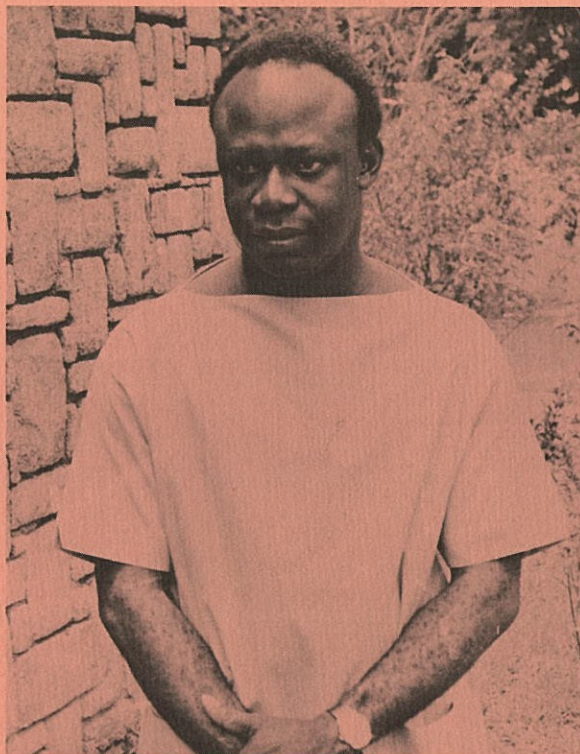


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*Primitivism and Other Misconceptions
of African Art—DR. EKPO EYO*

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PRIMITIVISM AND
OTHER MISCONCEPTIONS
OF AFRICAN ART

By Dr. Ekpo Eyo

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A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Dr. Ekpo Oko Eyo, National Director of the Nigerian Department of Antiquities, is a brilliant man who combines artistic insights, business acumen, academic scholarship, and a broad sense of humanity.

I know him as a warm friend and as a fellow trustee of the Leakey Foundation. His judgment on archaeological matters in Africa is based on deep knowledge and is laced with compassion.

In 1981, when he gave this paper at a seminar in the Munger Africana Library, we immediately requested his permission to publish it. Dr. Eyo had earlier delivered a version of it at a Leakey Foundation preview of the magnificent exhibition, *Two Thousand Years of Nigerian Art*, arranged in Los Angeles by Ms. Juanita St. John and Mayor Tom Bradley's Africa Task Force.

Dr. Eyo was born in Calabar in 1931. He is married and the father of two children. He is fluent in English, French, Hausa, and Yoruba among his languages. His Ph.D., from the University of Ibadan, followed graduate work at Cambridge University and at the University of London.

Dr. Eyo has published widely and is currently Secretary of the upcoming quadrennial Pan African Conference.

The reader will quickly discern that Dr. Eyo is a skilled polemicist. I almost wish he had turned his essay into a philippic by claiming, with greater evidence than has been adduced for the reverse, that some of the most famous of Greek bronzes must have come from a lost Nigerian colony somewhere in the Hellenic world.

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Primitivism and Other Misconceptions In African Art

Dr. Ekpo Eyo

INTRODUCTION

In his review of my book, *Two Thousand Years of Nigerian Art*,¹ Professor Herbert Cole of the University of California at Santa Barbara, wrote: "There are numerous solid generalities in the introduction, yet its tone is occasionally defensive, for example in the discussion of the word *primitivism* and the idea of *tribality*. Certainly today, moreover, it should be unnecessary to refute often outdated generalist writers such as Segy (1952) and Trowell (1953), especially when so few enlightened contemporary authors with years of experience in Nigeria are cited in the short list of references."² I set out in my book to challenge the concepts of "primitivism" and "tribality," which are commonly applied to African art, not because I was not aware of the opinion of those "enlightened contemporary authors," but because, in spite of their writings, the use of these concepts has become even more popular, perhaps as a result of the popularity of the art to which they are applied. Here I would like once again to draw attention to these misconceptions so that it can be seen that although the generalist writers are said to be outdated and presumed dead, their "souls keep marching on."

HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MISCONCEPTIONS

The Greeks and Romans

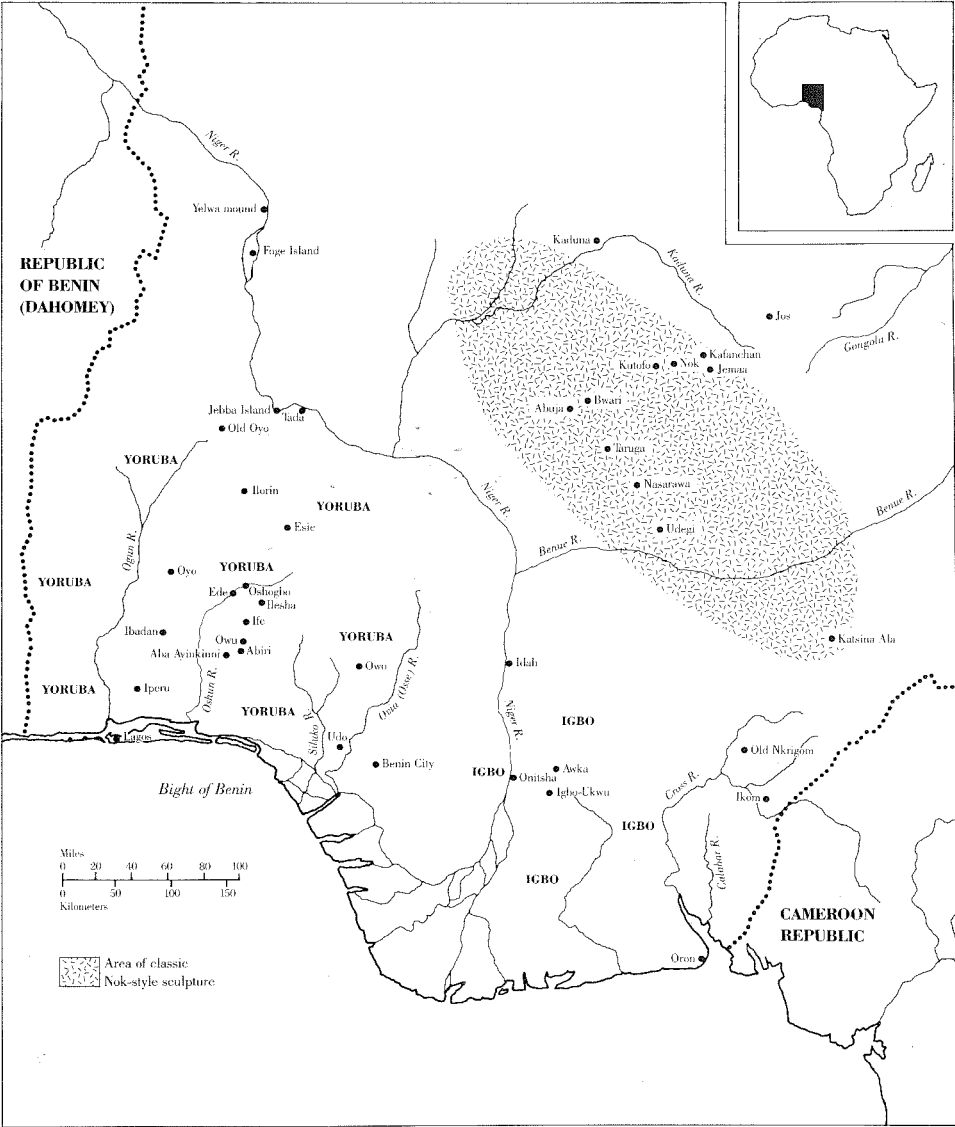
In order to gain a proper perspective of our subject, we first have to look at the history of the development of these misconceptions. It began with the Greeks and the Romans, who first lived in city-states and so regarded themselves as superior to others who lived in smaller scattered communities. Those who lived in small scattered communities were referred to as either savages or barbarians. The word "savage" is derived from the Latin *silva*, meaning "wood" or "forest," and savages were forest dwellers whom the Greeks and Romans believed had not risen above the level of the beasts. The word "barbarian," on the other hand, is derived from the Greek *barbaroi*, meaning those who do not speak the Greek language or whose language sounded "bar, bar" in the ears of the Greeks. For example, to the Greeks, the Celts and the Scythians were barbarians in spite of the fact that they, like the Greeks and Romans, had developed high arts and were successful warriors and good horsemen. Their only crime was that they did not speak the Greek language.³

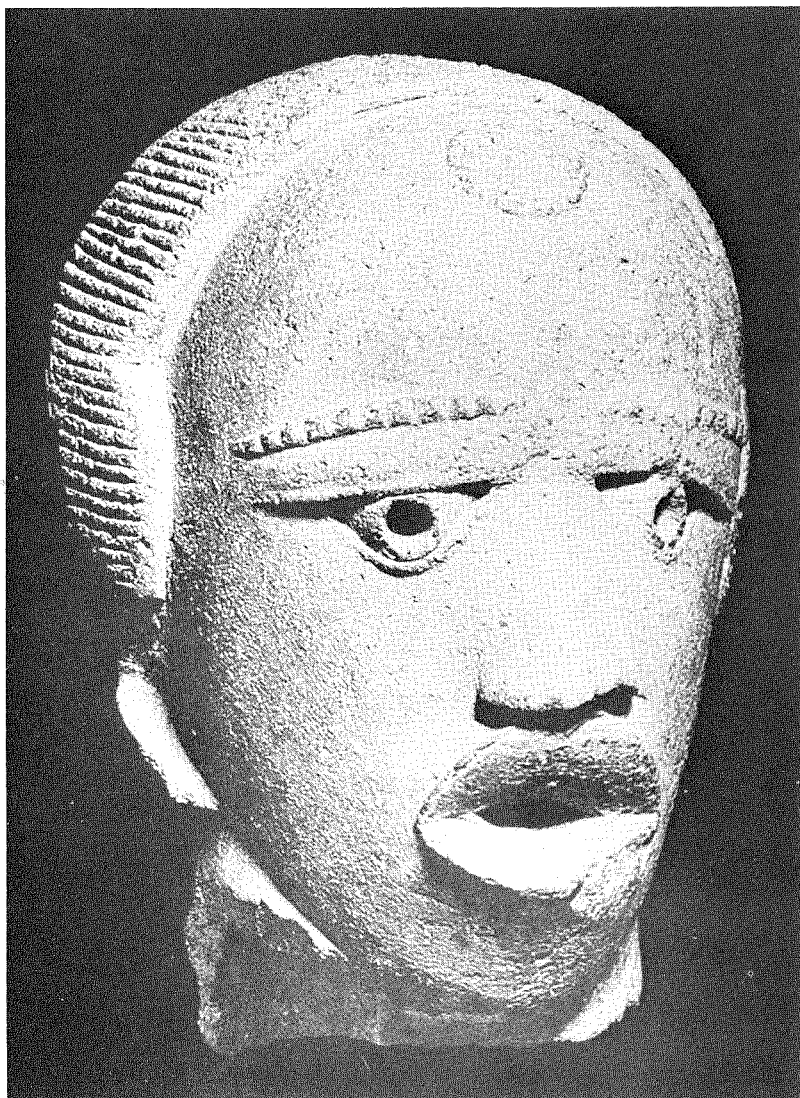
Darwin's Evolution

However, it was not until the nineteenth century that these two terms, savage and barbarian, began to acquire international currency as a result of two events, namely, Charles Darwin's publication of the *Origin of Species* in 1859⁴ and the rise of anthropology as an academic discipline. In the *Origin of Species*, Darwin demonstrated the process of biological evolution and this subsequently had a profound influence on the history of the development of thought. For example, in 1877, the American ethnologist and lawyer Lewis H. Morgan published a book entitled *Ancient Society*,⁵ in which he applied the principles of evolution to society by tracing human progress from savagery through barbarism to civilization. Morgan was followed in England by Sir Edward Tylor, who in his *Anthropology: An Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilisation*,⁶ published in 1881, held the same view that human society had progressed through the three developmental stages of savagery, barbarism, and civilization. On mainland Europe, the German geographer, Friedrich Ratzel, in his *Origins of Society*,⁷ published in 1896, also applied the Darwinian evolutionary principle and divided mankind into two categories, the "natural races" and the "civilized races." The natural races were those whose environment was a handicap to concrete achievements in the domain of culture, whereas the civilized races were regarded as masters of their environment. The natural races were, of course, non-Europeans and the civilized races were Europeans and peoples of European descent.

Having noted how the notions of savagery and barbarism came into being, let us also look at the notion of civilization. The word itself is derived from the Latin *civis*, meaning "citizen." In the English language, the use of this word "civilization" is not old; James Boswell (1740-1795), the biographer of Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), who was the originator of the *Dictionary of the English Language*, mentions that he had urged Dr. Johnson in 1772 to insert the word "civilization" in his dictionary but that Johnson refused, preferring the word "civility" to describe the culture of the townsman. It would appear, therefore, that the word "civilization" did not come into general usage until about the time of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of nationalism in Europe and North America. From then on, Europeans and North Americans alike came to see themselves as "we-the-haves" and others as "they-the-have-nots"—or rather as "we-the-civilized" and "they-the-uncivilized."

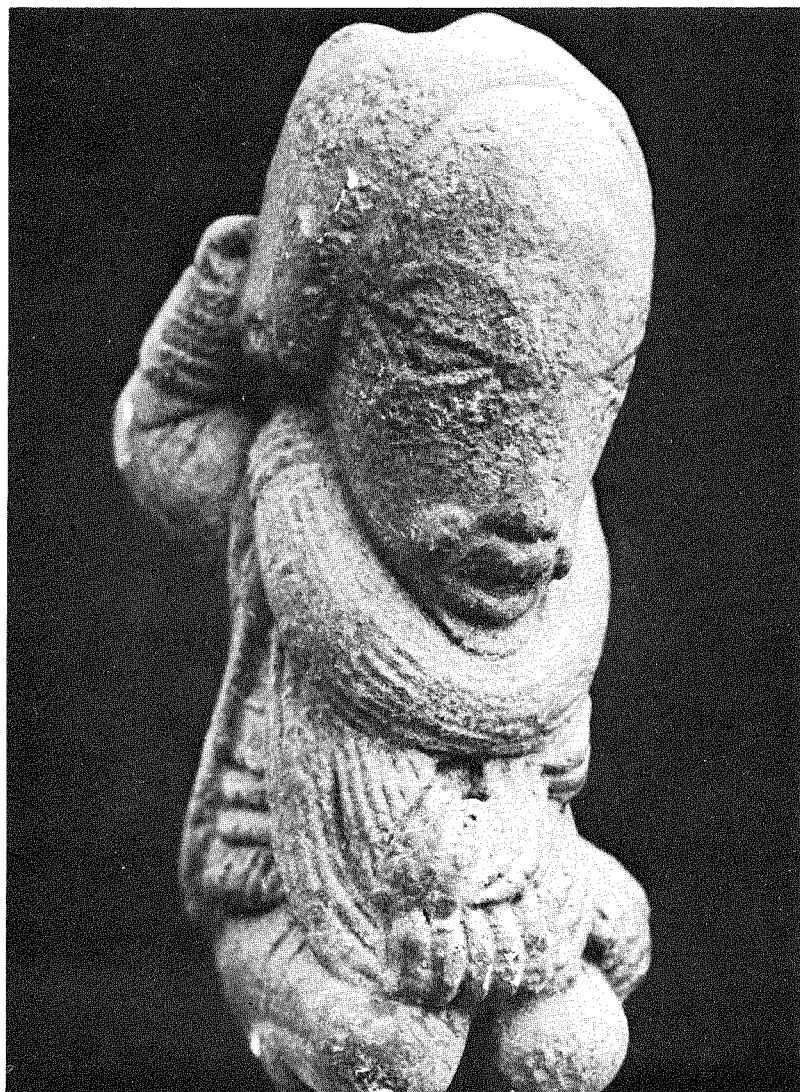
Once this dichotomy was established, the next step was for scholars to try to define civilization as the opposite of primitivism. It is little wonder, therefore, that twentieth-century anthropologists and archaeologists have occupied themselves principally with the task of defining these concepts. In two important publications, *Man Makes Himself*⁸ and *What Happened in History?*,⁹ the Australian archaeologist Gordon Childe identifies certain material objects and techniques that must be found in a society as a *sine qua non* for having attained a civilized status. These include the use of ploughs, the practice of irrigation, the ability to build and sail boats, the smelting of copper ores, the process of reckoning, the use of standard measurements, the existence of specialized craftsmen, the production of surplus foodstuffs, city life, writing, organized gov-





EXAMPLE OF NOK ART

Terracotta head with ring ornament on forehead. From Jemaa.
Date: c. 510 (\pm 230). Height: 25cm.



EXAMPLE OF NOK ART

Terracotta head of kneeling man bedecked with anklets, bracelets, and beads.
From Bwari, near Abuja. Date: c. 500 BC-AD 200. Height: 19cm.



IGBO UKWU BRONZE

Leaded bronze bowl, with decorative motifs that include insects, hatched triangles, lozenges, and circles. Date: 9th-10th centuries. Height: 20.3cm.



IGBO UKWU BRONZE

Leaded bronze shell surmounted by an animal, presumably a leopard.

Date: 9th-10th centuries. Length: 20.6cm

ernments, organized religion, and science. However, the last five of these are said to be the most important.

In the United States, later anthropologists have attempted more precise definitions of civilization. For example, at a meeting of anthropologists held in 1958 to discuss the origins of civilization in the Near East, I. J. Gelb¹⁰ stressed that writing is of such importance that civilization cannot exist without it, and another scholar, Clyde Kluckhohn,¹¹ emphasized that to achieve civilized status a society must fulfill at least two of three conditions: a population of, say, 5000 inhabitants, a written language, and monumental ceremonial centers.

In England, two eminent scholars, Stuart Piggott and Colin Renfrew, also labored on the definition of civilization. Piggott, in his preface to Max Mallo-
wan's *Early Mesopotamia and Iran*,¹² wrote that civilized societies are those based on relatively permanent communities as opposed to wandering, hunting, or small self-sufficient groups. Renfrew, on the other hand, in *Emergence of Civilisation*,¹³ sees civilization as a constantly recurring assemblage of artifacts that include two or all of the following: written records, monumental religious centers, and cities of at least 5000 inhabitants.

Since the criteria for a civilized status have been narrowed down to three by the "civilization anthropologists" themselves, let us briefly examine these three criteria to see how valid they are.¹⁴

Writing

We all know that writing is merely a system of recording and communicating by means of conventional signs, but it is by no means the only system. For example, a developed art style is an excellent way of recording information symbolically. The images or art works speak of social order, of status, and of the unknown. The information transmitted by art works need not be understood by all members of the society for, again like writing, the symbols have to be learned and understood by those who wish to be literate. Furthermore, until recently literacy everywhere was confined to a small minority, such as the mandarins of China or the priests and courtiers of Babylon and Egypt. Even after the invention of alphabets, peasants everywhere remained illiterate until the present century.

Be that as it may, on examination we find contradictions in the use of conventional writing as a *sine qua non* for civilization. For example, the Incas of Peru are one of the seven primary so-called civilized peoples recognized by anthropologists. They governed a vast empire from substantial cities and had a well-organized civil service, yet they had no true system of writing. On the other hand, the hieroglyphs or sign writing of the Mayans—another society recognized as civilized by anthropologists—seem to have been employed principally for calendrical purposes. In Nigeria, the Ekoi and the Efik peoples of the Cross River State had developed similar sign writing, known as *nsibidi*, but had no empires. Moreover, the peoples of the ancient city of Ile-Ife in Oyo State and of Benin City in Bendel State, though illiterate in the Western sense, ruled over far-flung empires and developed high art forms. Their works of art are by now familiar, and are freely compared to Greek art, which is esteemed as the ultimate in Western creativity. Yet neither the Ife nor the Bini are regarded by the civiliza-

tion anthropologists as being “civilized,” and their art is referred to as “primitive.”

Conventional writing itself appeared at different times and at different stages in the development of society. If we seek to trace its origins, the search is likely to lead us to all kinds of signs and marks on pots and cattle, to conventional designs on rock surfaces and on decorated calabashes, all of which are found in societies that are not considered to be civilized. It is most questionable, therefore, whether the use of writing as a *sine qua non* for a civilized status is tenable. Personally, I reject it, and would suggest that thoughtful persons ponder over it.

Monumental Religious Centers

Here again we find contradictions. Monumental religious centers imply systematized religion, monumental buildings, and a professional hierarchy of priests. But studies of traditional religions in Nigeria, notably S. F. Nadel's *Nupe Religion*¹⁵ and Bolaji Idowu's *Olodumare, God in Yoruba Belief*,¹⁶ have demonstrated that both the Nupe and the Yoruba have some of the most elaborate and systematized rituals. On the question of monumental temples, the Egyptian or the Mayan temples may present visual symbols of their religious beliefs, but how is it that no temples are yet known in the “great civilizations” of the Indus valley? Similarly, both the Cretan “civilization” in the Aegean and Mycenae on the mainland of Greece had small shrines that are no more impressive than those of the Yoruba and Benin kingdoms or even of the *Mbari* shrines so commonly found in the acephalous Igbo society of Nigeria. Furthermore, the monumental temples of Malta belonged to a society that had few other advanced features. As for the hierarchy of priests, the Yoruba of Nigeria are second only to the ancient Egyptians in the number and ranking of gods in a pantheon, which requires the existence of a hierarchy of priests. It is therefore easy to see how inconsistent the use of this criterion is in determining a “civilized” status.

Cities of At Least 5000 People

If an essential feature of civilization is the city, there seems to be no one-to-one correspondence between civilizations and cities. For example, there were no great cities in the recognized “civilizations” of the Maya, of Mycenae, or of Egypt before the eighteenth dynasty. But how easy is it to define a city in terms of area and population? We do have the concept that a city is larger than a town, and a town bigger than a village, but how much larger than a town is a city? And how much bigger is a town than a village? Is the determinant of a city status the mere geographical area, or is it the number of citizens it contains? I recall that when Kathleen Kenyon excavated the site of Jericho in the Near East, she claimed a city status for it.¹⁷ But Jericho was only eight acres in area, although it had a wall around it. Some authorities, such as Harvard's Braidwood¹⁸ and the Australian Gordon Childe,¹⁹ think that Jericho may even have been a farmland or a cattle kraal containing a few houses.

You will recall that Clyde Kluckhohn said that a city that contains 5000 inhabitants or more qualifies for a civilized status. Those of you, therefore, who

have been to Nigeria must begin to wonder how places such as Lagos, Ibadan, Ife, Owo, Benin, Calabar, Sokoto, Kano, Maiduguri, and so on, with large areas and with populations ranging from 800,000 to 4,000,000, fit into this scheme. Are they villages, are they towns, are they cities? Do they have civilized or uncivilized status? Is it not obvious, then, that to use this sort of criterion to determine a civilized status is not only incorrect but ludicrous?

I have dwelt at length on these inconsistencies, because I want it to be realized that epithets such as "primitive," "tribal," "ethnic," and what have you that are used in describing African art are egocentric and Eurocentric. It all boils down to the way in which a society sees itself on the one hand, and sees others on the other hand. It has to do with the concept of binary opposition so well stated by the French anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss.²⁰ It is a concept in which two similar things are at the same time opposed to one another and in which one can only be understood in terms of its opposite, for example: we/they; good/evil; life/death; white/black; civilized/uncivilized or primitive; and so on. For at the moment when Europeans and North Americans adopted the concept of civilization for themselves, all others had to be regarded as uncivilized or primitive. And in the attempts of Western scholars to justify the claim to superiority and a civilized status for their own society they dubbed others as uncivilized and then sold the idea to the world through domination and the powerful media of Western education and propaganda.

PRIMITIVISM

Now, it is understood that the word "primitive" is used as the opposite of "civilized." The Oxford English Dictionary defines "primitive" as "first or earliest of its kind." Applied to art, it refers to the first or earliest art. In his book *Primitive Art*,²¹ Leonard Adam states: "Primitive man is a general term for native races of Africa, the South Seas, America and certain parts of Asia. Their classification as primitive is based on the stage of their cultural development rather than their somatic features. . . . The theory is that these cultural stages are earlier in the development of ideas." He then goes on to say that art is not an isolated phenomenon but is a part of culture, and that what has been said about culture in general applies particularly to the development of art. He concludes: "Since the first stage of anything is usually underdeveloped, a popular meaning has grown up for primitive art." It denotes "something crude, lacking that certain accord of lines, spaces or colours, which is the source of our [meaning European] emotional sensation when we look at a real work of art." He adds: "Actually this [i.e., primitive art] is not so much a work of art as an unsuccessful attempt to produce one," and then cheerfully explains that art critics use primitivism to describe a certain naiveté of inspiration and simplicity of vision that appear in some of the art in every period and of every people, but that when one compares civilized art with primitive art, one finds that the only real difference is the *foreignness in form and content* (italics mine).

We gain further insight into the notion of primitivism from Ralph Linton's introduction to Elliot Elisofon and William Fagg's *African Sculpture*.²² According

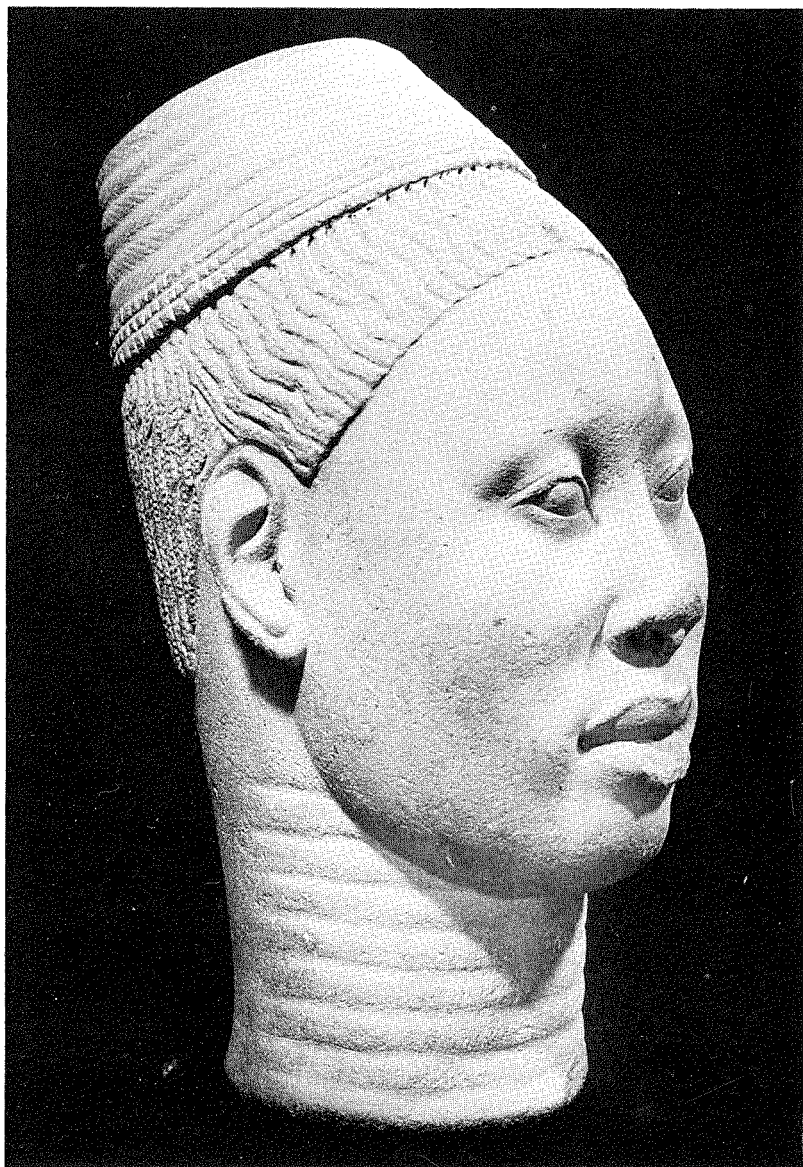
to Linton, the adjective "primitive" is, as we have already noted, used first to denote the beginning of artistic tradition. Secondly, it is used to differentiate the works of non-Europeans from those of Europeans. In other words, what is non-European art is primitive art. Finally, it is used to describe the works of those artists who have never been to a formal art school.

The third European authority on the concept of primitivism that I would like to mention is Robert Goldwater, who, in a paper entitled "Western Experience of Negro Art,"²³ presented at the First World Festival of Negro Art in Dakar, Senegal, in 1964, paternalistically extolled the so-called primitive art for its simplicity: "Simplicity, not for its own sake, but because the simple thing is clear and clarity reveals those truths that complication tries to hide." Goldwater was the curator of the Museum of Primitive Art in New York until his death, but, oddly enough, throughout his lifetime he never made any effort to change its name from "Museum of Primitive Art" to "Museum of Simplicity Art."

In discussing this issue, I, an African, run the risk of being accused of oversensitivity, but such an accusation could be justified only if I denied the existence of primitivism in African art. Obviously, as in everything else there were humble beginnings in African art traditions. But from a purely archaeological point of view, we know that every tradition, every tool, or every work of art produced by man is the result of a long period of development. Indeed, any art object that we find in Africa today must be regarded as the terminal product of a long line of evolutionary process.

Let us for now admit the existence of primitive art styles in Africa in the same way as there exist Italian or American primitives. But does this mean that all African art forms are at the bottom of the Western artistic hierarchy? Do all African works epitomize simplicity? Looking at the collection of "Treasures of Ancient Nigeria," recently exhibited in New York, Los Angeles, and other cities, we find an artistic continuum that spans more than two thousand years and consists of numerous pieces that are as complex in style as any in the world. The Nok art pieces that formed the earliest artistic style presented there are so advanced that they do not appear to be at the beginning of the Nok artistic tradition. The Igbo Ukwu bronzes are so intricate that only accomplished artists anywhere could have produced them. As for the Ife works, they are so perfect that when the German ethnologist, Leo Frobenius, saw them in 1908²⁴ he immediately thought they were of Greek origin, "eloquent of a symmetry, a vitality, a delicacy of form directly reminiscent of Ancient Greece." I reject this comparison, which I know was a deliberate attempt by Frobenius to attribute these works to Greek origin, but now that it has been proved beyond doubt that these pieces are of indigenous manufacture, the comparison is interesting, since, as aforesaid, Greek art is regarded as the ultimate in European artistic creativity. It is even more interesting to note that some of the Nok pieces predate the golden age of Greek art.

In order to answer Linton's point that one has to go to a formal school to produce civilized art, it is relevant to ask what formal art schools the producers of Nok, Igbo, Ukwu, Ife, Owo, and Benin arts were to go to? Is it not therefore naive to think that because the producers of these art works never attended formal art



EXAMPLE OF IFE ART

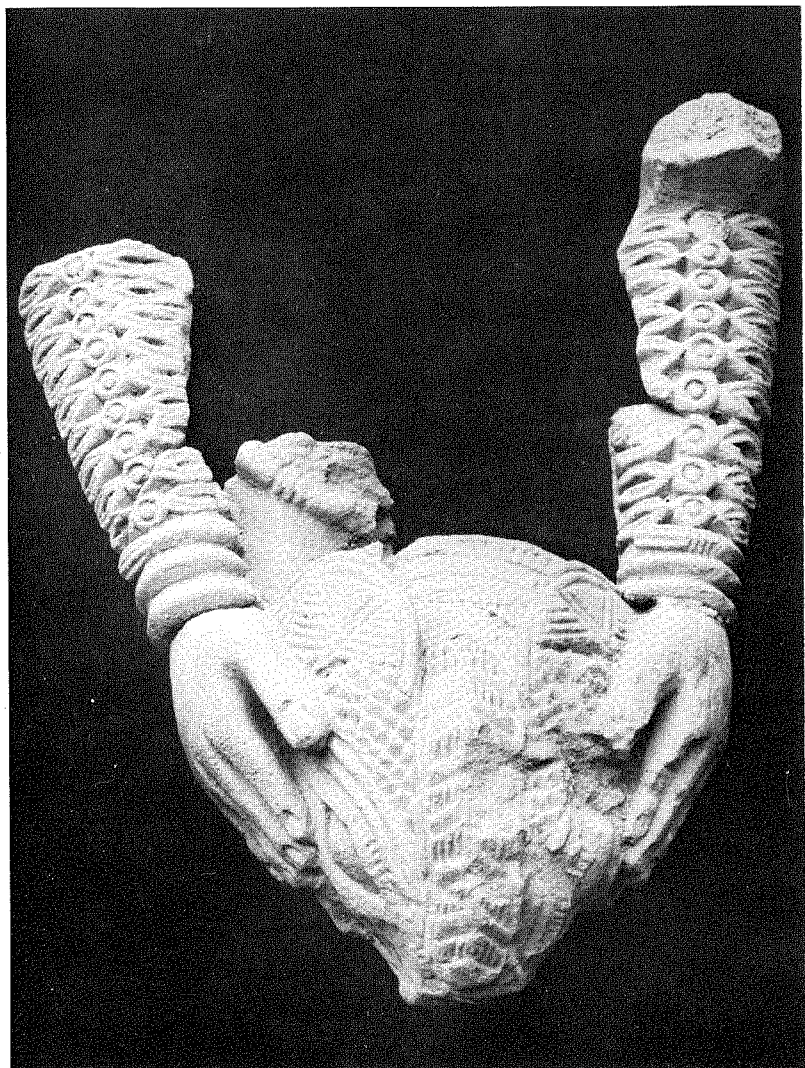
Terracotta head wearing a cap over textured hair. Said to represent Lajuwa, who tried to usurp the throne when King Aworokolokin died.

Date: 12th-16th centuries. Height: 32.8cm.



EXAMPLE OF IFE ART

Bronze (zinc-brass) half figure representing a king of Ife. Left hand holds ram's horn, broken off right hand probably held sceptre.
Date: 15th-16th centuries. Height: 37cm.



EXAMPLE OF OWO ART

Terracotta arms holding an animal's head, clearly part of a figure making a presentation. Heavily clad arms suggest royalty.

Date: c. 15th century. Height: 36cm.



EXAMPLE OF OWO ART

Terracotta head of frowning man wearing sideburns, beard, and moustache.
Date: c. 15th century. Height: 11cm.

schools their products are primitive? What we often forget is that the ability to create works of art cannot be taught. The function of an art school is to offer a proper environment for creativity. The African sculptor with artistic potentiality needs only the stimulus that his society and environment provide and the result is art. He may, of course, as is often the case, be guided by professional family experience to achieve better results.

TRIBALITY

Let us now examine another concept, that of tribality. Some scholars agree that the use of "primitive" in describing African art is a misconception, yet they cannot get themselves away from the we/they dichotomy. Hence, we find the word "primitive" being substituted for by an equally objectionable adjective, "tribal." In an effort to demonstrate that African art is tribal art, William Fagg, in his book *Tribes and Forms in African Art*,²⁵ identified certain art forms that are exclusive to certain tribes. The main thesis of tribality is that each tribe has its own art style which disappears with the disappearance of the tribe or at detribalization. Furthermore, a tribal art is said never to be created outside tribal boundaries and each tribe is said to be an artistic universe on its own, its art not being understood or appreciated by those outside the tribe because tribal art expresses the philosophy and religious beliefs peculiar to the tribe.

In expectation of opposition to this misconception, Fagg says that any objection to this theory by an African could come about only as the result of a possible confusion of the word "tribality" with the word "tribalism," which most Africans would like to do away with.²⁶

My contention against the concept of "tribality" is based on some other grounds. First, Fagg did not offer a definition of a tribe—just as no one has been able to define a city. Secondly, it is certainly not correct to say that works of art of one tribe, whatever that may mean, are not appreciated by people from a different tribe. Appreciation of a work of art is not limited to esthetics only, it results also from an understanding of the meaning of the art. For the African, the latter is more important, though the former is often taken into consideration. We know that masks and carved figures have a common significance in all African societies, and indeed throughout the world. Every African knows that masks are used as disguises to represent spirits or ancestors and for their physical representation in the human world. For example, if a Yoruba man goes to an Igbo community and comes across a shrine containing masks and figures, or comes across masquerades, be they connected with entertainment or with secret rituals, he would immediately recognize the situation and respond accordingly. He does not need to know the name of the mask or the cult with which it is associated in order to realize its significance. For although there is a great variety of religious beliefs and philosophies in African societies, they all exist within a greater entity of which almost every African is aware.

As for whether each tribe is a universe on its own, we know, of course, that total isolation of societies is very rare if not impossible. While it is true that intercourse between two groups is sometimes difficult as a result of inadequacy of

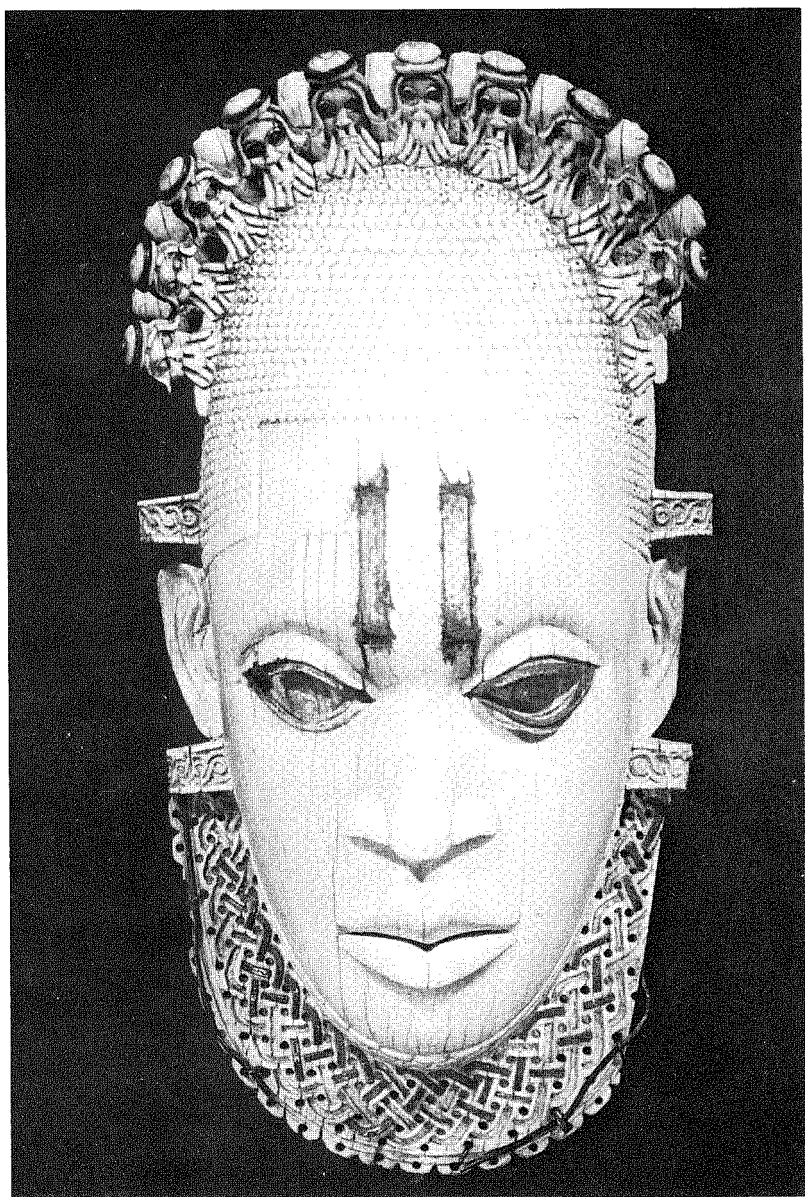
communication systems, instances abound in which ethnic groups have been in contact through trade or war, and when this happens borrowing of artistic ideas, appreciation of each other's works, and sometimes actual transfer of artistic items take place. For example, the Ogbom figures of the Bende Igbo in Nigeria are common both to the Igbo and the Ibibio, who have a contiguous territory with the Igbo. Also, according to Frank Willett,²⁷ the Ishan people of Bendel State buy and use Ibibio masks from the Cross River State in their rituals and masquerades.

From the foregoing it is obvious that the concepts of "primitivism" and "tribality" cannot be sustained. They are egocentric or Eurocentric in origin and are derogatory in connotation. I admit that some scholars, including Professor Cole, have already done away with these concepts and prefer to call the art from Africa "African art," the art from Oceania "Oceanian art," and so on. But it is disturbing that when one opens the pages of the magazine *African Arts*,²⁸ one finds them full of advertisements for the sale of "primitive" or "tribal" art. Take a walk down Park, Fifth, or Madison Avenues in New York and you will find numerous art galleries dedicated to the sale of "primitive" or "tribal" art. Go to London, where in the two famous art sale rooms, Sotheby's and Christie's, one has a department of primitive art and the other of tribal art. These departments deal with the sale of the art of Africa, Oceania, and the indigenous peoples of the Americas. At the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the "Treasures of Ancient Nigeria" exhibition was handled by the Department of Primitive Art. I shall make no further comment.

UNIVERSALITY

I have tried here to show how unsatisfactory the use of the epithets "primitive" and "tribal" are in describing African art and how this has come about as a result of Eurocentricity. The point is that art is art wherever it may be found. Tibor Bodrogi, in *Art in Africa*,²⁹ states his belief that if anyone succeeded in drawing a distinction between the arts it would be merely a subjective one, based on familiarity with a limited range of artistic forms. He argues, quite plausibly, that art is always and everywhere a response by the creative individual to questions raised by him or by the external world.

Another scholar who sees art as a universal phenomenon is Otto Bihaji-Merin. Writing in *World Cultures and Modern Art*,³⁰ Bihaji-Merin succinctly states: "Practically all the streams in European and North American art — impressionism, post-impressionism, art nouveau, fauvism, expressionism, Cubism, Dadaism, surrealism, action painting, art informal—have taken over elements or methods from the arts of Asia or from art which, until then, had been designated primitive." Bihaji-Merin was, of course, comparing the works of such art giants of the West as Picasso, Cézanne, Derain, Glaminck, Brancusi, and Modigliani with those of the so-called primitives. The art of Western Europe had for a long time been influenced by the classical art of the Greek and Roman and later periods. But by the end of the last century, European artists had sought freedom and had succeeded in liberating themselves from the rigid for-



BENIN COURT ART

Ivory mask said to represent Queen Idia, mother of King Esigie, who reigned up to 1550 A.D. Top is surmounted by heads representing Portuguese. Parallel strips on forehead were inlaid with brass, as was lacework under chin.

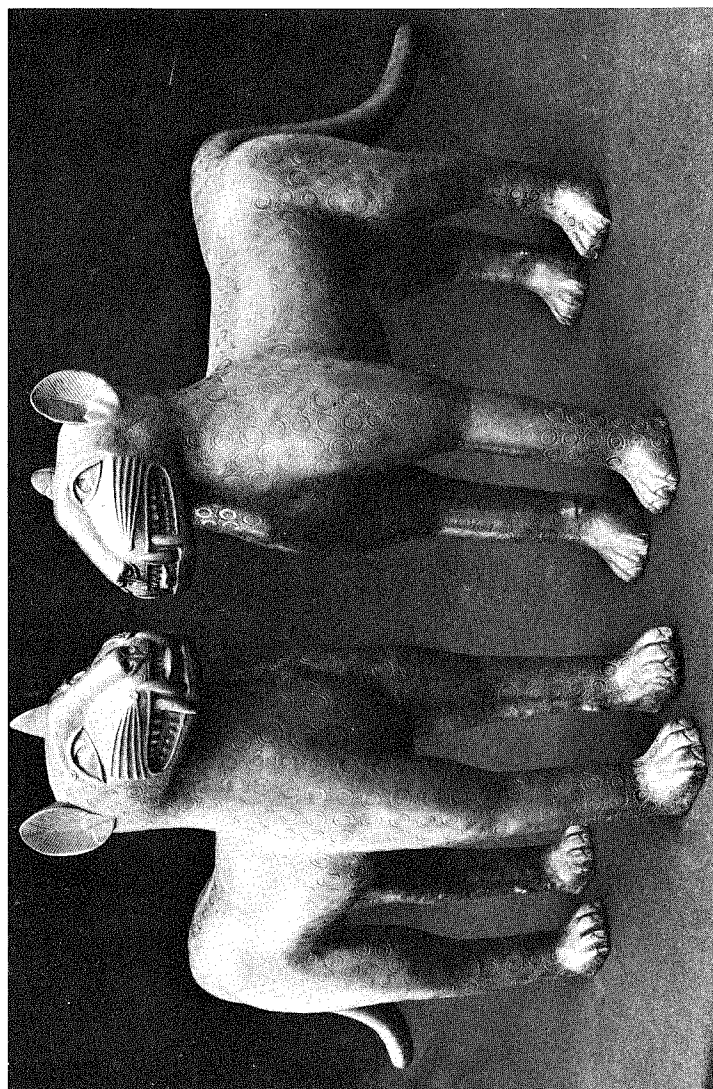
Height: 25cm.



BENIN COURT ART

Bronze (brass) plaque, showing a warrior with attendants. The warrior holds a ceremonial sword and a spear. Inset figures represent a sword-keeper, a musician, a Portuguese soldier, and another warrior.

Date: 16th-17th centuries. Height: 43.5cm.



BENIN COURT ART

Bronze (brass) leopards in the form of aquamantle. Leopards represented royalty in Benin, and live ones were actually kept at court. Date: 16th century. Length: 69cm.

malism of the past. They had sought new forms and ideas when the momentous occasion came during an exhibition of African art in Paris in 1889. From then on Western artists came under the spell, the force, the rhythm and the intensity of African art pieces, which unchained them from rigid formalism and freed their creativity. The result has been the pluralism of styles which now characterize modern European art, and, consequently, the enrichment of the artistic capital of mankind.

Can we now say that by taking this beneficial course, "civilized" European artists have returned full circle to primitivism and tribalism?

DISCUSSION

Q: If "primitive" has racial overtones, and I agree with you, what word would you use?

A: We could leave "primitive" out of our vocabulary. If an art piece comes from Africa, it is African Art. If it comes from Oceania, it is Oceanic art. That is simple enough, isn't it?

Q: What about modern Nigerian art?

A: The world is moving toward a convergence, and so is art. We have young artists trained in Europe and America and those trained at home in Western art techniques who paint and sculpt in "Western" styles. They may use those Western techniques but most of them draw their inspiration from traditional Nigerian themes and are influenced by local environment.

Q: Dr. Eyo, I don't quite see what you are protesting. If anyone in this audience was not convinced of the superb quality of African art before you began to speak, we were all convinced in the first thirty minutes.

A: That is good to hear. But you are far from being a typical audience in America or elsewhere. You are probably unaware of the constant deluge of writing that equates African art with "primitive," "folk," "backward," and "uncivilized." I am not always as successful in persuading people as you suggest I have been today.

Q: Is there an African culture that thinks of European art as primitive?

A: There may well be, and if there is, their thought would be connected with the dichotomy of we/they to which I referred. An African culture that thinks this way is equally to blame. However, such a case would be an exception rather than the rule.

Q: Let me echo an earlier question. You are talking about converting people: who needs converting?



BENIN COURT ART

Bronze bowman from Jebba Island in the River Niger, with a quiver on his back and a charm ring around his neck. Date: c. 14th or 15th centuries. Height: 92cm.

A: As long as the UCLA magazine, *African Arts*, takes advertisements for "Primitive or Tribal Art," The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York maintains a "Department of Primitive Arts," the Sotheby Auction Room in London has a "Department of Primitive Art," and Christie's, also in London, a "Department of Tribal Art," there is a lot of work to be done.

Q: (By a student from Beijing): I see a progression in Chinese art from the use of simpler materials to more technically advanced materials. We moved from clay to bronze.

A: Quality of art is not a function of its medium. One can have works in clay of high quality and works in bronze of low quality.

Q: Do you see an art form or style emerging in Nigeria which does not have its roots in either traditional Nigerian art or traditional European art—something that is wholly a product of industrializing Nigeria?

A: Yes, but that cannot make such an art superior to one from a pre-industrialized Nigeria.

Q: Is your book *Two Thousand Years of Nigerian Art* going to be available in paperback? How can misconceptions be changed if instructional materials are not available within the purse of the many and not just the few?

A: Arrangements are being made with a publisher in London for a paperback edition. I hope it won't be too long before this hope is realized.

Q: How would you characterize the reception of your magnificent show on the "Treasures of Ancient Nigerian Art" in New York, Detroit, San Francisco, Washington, Atlanta, Calgary, and Los Angeles? And where has it still to be exhibited?

A: Fantastic! It has been a revelation! However, some people do not know how to react to it, since they did not expect to see such an outstanding show. Some still think, as Frobenius did in 1908, that the pieces are the products of the Lost Atlantis. Can you believe that? The show goes to Philadelphia next before it begins a European tour that will take it to Moscow and Leningrad, Sofia, Louisianna (Denmark), Oslo, Stockholm, London and Glasgow, and Paris. It will then have been in circulation for four and a half years.

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